

Video: John Bolton debunks the NIE, suggests that long-time Bush critics politicized it

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If you'd like to have your confidence in the CIA and in National Estimates in particular shattered, go read this:

In 1986 I was working for the Kissinger Commission on Central America and as such I was allowed to see the NIEs on all the relevant countries in the circum-Caribbean. I vividly recall the one on Mexico. Among other things it claimed that the foreign minister of that country was an embittered leftist married to a Soviet citizen. As it happens, I knew the son of the couple (he has since become foreign minister of Mexico in his own right) and I knew for a fact that his mother was not a Soviet citizen. Far from it. She was a nice Jewish lady who lived in New York and grew up in Brooklyn. It is, I suppose, possible that she was brought to the US in the 1920s from the Soviet Union—at age 3. But there is a crucial difference between that and what was in the NIE. The implications for our foreign policy were very different.

If that's indicative of the quality that goes into the NIE year in and year out, the average blog is more accurate and relevant than the National Intelligence Estimate. That ought to be a scandal.

As the former Under Secretary for Arms Control and past US Ambassador to the UN, John Bolton is in a position to know much of the back story behind the National Intelligence Estimate that was released this week. Perhaps not surprisingly, Bolton is as skeptical of the NIE as Israel's Dan Gillerman is.

John Bolton on Fox

{youtube}CbKcQiexMFM{/youtube}

Bolton drops a hint at the politics built into the NIE when he notes that he knows who was behind the change in tone from 2005's NIE, which alleged an ongoing Iranian nuclear weapons program, with this year's, which alleges that the Iranians shut their nuclear weapons program down in 2003.

In the clip, Bolton doesn't name the people he suspects of politicizing the NIE to suit their own agendas. Kenneth Timmerman does.

The National Intelligence Council, which produced the NIE, is chaired by Thomas Fingar, "a State Department intelligence analyst with no known overseas experience who briefly headed the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research," I wrote in my book "Shadow Warriors: The Untold Story of Traitors, Saboteurs, and the Party of Surrender."

Fingar was a key partner of Senate Democrats in their successful effort to derail the confirmation of John Bolton in the spring of 2005 to become the U.S. permanent representative to the United Nations.

As the head of the NIC, Fingar has gone out of his way to fire analysts "who asked the wrong questions," and who challenged the politically-correct views held by Fingar and his former State Department colleagues, as revealed in "Shadow Warriors."

In March 2007, Fingar fired his top Cuba and Venezuela analyst, Norman Bailey, after he warned of the growing alliance between Castro and Chavez.

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Collaborating with Fingar on the Iran estimate, released on Monday, were Kenneth Brill, the director of the National Counterproliferation Center, and Vann H. Van Diepen, the National Intelligence officer for Weapons of Mass Destruction and Proliferation.

“Van Diepen was an enormous problem,” a former colleague of his from the State Department told me when I was fact gathering for “Shadow Warriors”;

“He was insubordinate, hated WMD sanctions, and strived not to implement them,” even though it was his specific responsibility at State to do so, the former colleague told me.

In his book (which I highly recommend), Bolton does call out Brill for attempting to weaken Iran-related IAEA work in June 2003 and Brill comes across in the book as insubordinate and driven by his own agendas, whatever they were, rather than acting on the clear instructions from his superiors in the administration including Bolton and then National Security Advisor Rice. This isn’t a smoking gun that Brill is guilty, but does demonstrate at least to me that there’s an established pattern on the part of one of the named figures that have turned up in association with the NIE.

My working take on this is that, first, anything that has the Iranians crowing about a victory over us is either being greatly misunderstood or mischaracterized or it’s very problematic for us. Second, I’d like to know why this NIE is more believable than the one that it contradicts from two years ago. That’s not snark; it just reflects the fact that we don’t know the underlying facts that have driven this reversal. Those facts weren’t released, while the open source facts (some of which turned up in the NIE itself) still point to a weapons program. The Washington Post hints at it, but doesn’t deliver enough to reassure.

Communications intercepts of Iranian nuclear officials and a stolen Iranian laptop containing diagrams related to the development of a nuclear warhead for missiles both yielded valuable evidence about Iran’s nuclear past as well as its decision in 2003 to suspend the weapons side of its program.

But there was no “eureka” moment, according to senior officials who helped supervise the collection efforts. The surge in intelligence-gathering helped convince analysts that Iran had made a “course correction” in 2003, halting the weapons work while proceeding with the civilian nuclear energy program.

The result, ironically, was a new National Intelligence Estimate on Iran that reached conclusions far different from what many intelligence officials expected.

Betrayed here is the fact that we still don’t know enough to know what we don’t know about Iran’s intentions. It’s the old unknown unknowns problem. We know they’re enriching uranium because they say they are. If they’re not doing that to build a weapon, then what is the purpose?

I also share Jonah Goldberg’s distaste for putting the intelligence process of reform above the actual results that our intelligence community produces. This tendency to put process and consensus ahead of results has been a problem across the board in the US government for quite a few years now. We’re at war, and Iran is a dangerous player in the wider war. We need reliable data, not glad happys and grins that, gee, we may not be right about anything but by golly, we all had a good group hug after the meeting.

Speculating a bit, if it’s true that Iran shelved its nuclear weapons program in 2003 (and I’m by no means convinced that it did), they would obviously have done so in response to US action in Iraq and Afghanistan plus US-led diplomatic moves afterward. Coupled with the recent detente with North Korea, it’s possible (though again, I’m far from convinced on this, and I’m also far from convinced that North Korea’s turn is going to hold) that Bush administration policies have succeeded in taming two of the most notoriously hostile countries on the planet. If that turns out to be the case, the historic assessment of the Bush presidency will be much more positive than its present approval rating suggests is even possible.<http://hotair.com/archives/2007/12/05/video-john-bolton-debunks-the-nie-suggests-that-long-time-bush-critics-politicized-it/>